



CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY AT VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE: SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

Nguyen Cong Uoc¹,

Nguyen Duc Huy²ⁱ

¹University of Education,
Vietnam National University,
Hanoi, Vietnam

Vietnam National University of Agriculture,
Hanoi, Vietnam

²University of Education,
Vietnam National University,
Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract:

The study to assess the capacity to implement autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions should aim to consider the existing capacity of lecturers, the system of facilities and the financial capacity to meet the requirements of autonomy. This article covers the most basic, decisive factors closely associated with quality assurance conditions for a higher education institution, analyzes the current situation of the capacity to implement autonomy and accountability at the Vietnam National University of Agriculture, at the same time, proposes a number of solutions to improve the capacity to implement autonomy and accountability.

Keywords: capacity; capacity to exercise autonomy; capacity of human resources; facilities capacity; financial capacity

1. Introduction

Implementing the Party's guidelines and the Government's resolutions, many higher education institutions have been and are implementing mechanisms of autonomy, self-responsibility, and accountability. During the implementation process, both objective and subjective factors affecting the outcomes have gradually become apparent. These factors are not merely related to policies or rational-legal frameworks through documents and administrative decisions by management levels but are significantly influenced by the inherent capabilities, capacities, and conditions for the implementation of autonomy, self-responsibility, and accountability within the higher education institutions

ⁱ Correspondence: email ncuoc@vnua.edu.vn, huynd@vnu.edu.vn

themselves. Therefore, when researching and evaluating the capacity for autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions, it is essential to consider the current capabilities of the teaching staff, the infrastructure systems, and the financial capacity to meet the requirements for organizational, personnel, academic, and financial autonomy, as well as fulfilling the institutions' commitments to the quality of education, scientific research, and community service before management agencies and society.

Analyzing and evaluating the capacity for autonomy and accountability of Vietnamese higher education institutions is truly essential. Through the results of such evaluations, recommendations and solutions can be proposed to support and promote the implementation process of autonomy and accountability steps that are suitable for the existing capacities of the higher education institutions themselves. This article addresses the most fundamental and decisive factors closely linked to quality assurance conditions for a higher education institution, analyzes the current state of autonomy and accountability capacity at the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture, and simultaneously proposes several solutions to enhance the capacity for autonomy and accountability.

2. Capacity for Autonomy and Accountability

The concept of capacity has long been researched and widely discussed in the social sciences, particularly in psychology, education, linguistics, economics, and management sciences. Recently, with its increasing practical significance, the concept of capacity has been frequently considered and utilized in phrases such as: competency-based training, competency-based teaching, competency-based selection, and competency-based assessment in the fields of education and training. Similarly, in the field of management, terms such as competency-based management, competency-based selection, and competency-based personnel arrangement have become common. In evaluation studies related to individuals and organizations, the focus often lies on assessing the capacity of individuals and organizations to perform specific tasks or duties. The logic behind capacity studies is that by understanding the actual and potential abilities of individuals and organizations, we can strive to create the best possible conditions for them to fully realize their potential in completing their tasks.

In Vietnamese, the term "năng lực" is often considered equivalent to the English terms competence, ability, and capability. Generally, năng lực is understood as the combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, motivations, or other important characteristics of an individual or organization to complete tasks and ensure the quality of outcomes. Québec - Ministère de l'Éducation (2004) defines competence as "*the ability to mobilize knowledge, experiences, skills, attitudes, and passion to act appropriately and effectively in various life situations.*"

According to psychologists, in any human activity, effective and high-quality performance requires certain necessary psychological qualities, and the combination of these qualities is referred to as competence. Human competence is always associated with their specific activities. Thus, competence should be understood as the synthesis of an

individual's characteristics and attributes that enable them to meet the demands and requirements of activities, ensuring that these activities achieve the desired results.

From various perspectives, "*Phạm Văn Quyết and Nguyễn Quốc Thành (2016) provided a generalized definition of competence as the inherent actual and potential ability of an individual, group, organization, or system to ensure the effective performance of their functions and tasks or to meet their activity requirements efficiently with productivity, quality, and sustainability.*" The concept of competence encompasses the inherent conditions of the subject, the readiness to act, the will, and the social responsibility to utilize these conditions effectively.

The capacity for autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions refers to the inherent actual ability of these institutions to organize and implement regulations for autonomy, self-responsibility, and accountability, along with policy orientations that ensure the realization of these abilities. This includes the current objective and subjective conditions of the institutions and the strategic plans and orientations for developing these conditions to ensure the institution's organizational, personnel, academic, infrastructural, and financial autonomy, as well as social commitments.

Accordingly, the capacity of higher education institutions to implement autonomy and accountability is manifested through various factors. These may include university governance capacity, the quality and quantity of faculty and staff, the capacity of the existing infrastructure, and financial capabilities, along with future plans and strategies. These factors are also linked to the regulatory systems, the management and control by relevant ministries and agencies, and the social environment of the localities where the institutions are located.

3. Current State of Capacity for Autonomy and Accountability at the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture

The Vietnam Academy of Agriculture, formerly known as the University of Agriculture and Forestry, is one of the four institutions established on October 12, 1956, by Decree No. 53/NL-NĐ of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Over time, it has undergone several name changes, including the Academy of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Agriculture, University of Agriculture I, Hanoi University of Agriculture, and now the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture (hereafter referred to as the Academy).

For nearly 64 years of development and growth, the Academy's primary mission has been to train undergraduate and postgraduate human resources to serve the country's socio-economic development, especially in the fields of agriculture, rural development, rational resource use, and environmental protection. The Academy has educated over 80,000 undergraduate professionals, nearly 5,000 master's degree holders, and almost 1,000 doctoral graduates in various fields such as Agronomy, Animal Husbandry, Veterinary Medicine, Economics, Mechanical Engineering, Land

Management, Food Technology, and Environmental Science. Many of these graduates have held or are currently holding key positions or are leading experts in central and local government agencies, educational institutions, scientific research organizations, and production facilities across the country.

On June 17, 2015, the Prime Minister signed and issued Decision No. 873/QĐ-TTg approving the pilot project for innovating the operational mechanism of the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture for the 2015-2017 period. The general objective of this project was for the Academy to proactively exploit and efficiently utilize resources to innovate and improve the quality of education, striving to become a multidisciplinary research university that meets regional and international standards. Additionally, the project aimed to ensure that policy beneficiaries and individuals from low-income households have the opportunity to study at the Academy.

In this study, to assess the capacity of the Academy for implementing autonomy and accountability, we analyze three fundamental and decisive factors closely tied to the quality assurance conditions for a higher education institution:

- **Faculty and Staff Capacity and Development Plans:** This is the most critical factor for executing tasks related to autonomy and accountability, determining the success or failure of university organization, governance, and academic quality. It encompasses the skills, qualifications, and development orientation of the faculty and administrative staff.
- **Infrastructure Capacity and Development Strategies:** The physical infrastructure of higher education institutions, along with the plans and strategies for its development, is essential. This includes classrooms, land, recreational fields, offices, laboratories, practical training facilities, library information systems, and other equipment that support administration, education, scientific research, and community service.
- **Financial Capacity and Development Plans:** The financial capabilities and strategic financial development plans of higher education institutions are crucial. This involves income sources such as tuition fees, scientific research, production, and services, and how these revenues are allocated to cover regular expenses, capital construction, and other expenditures necessary for the institution's operations.

3.1. Faculty and Staff Capacity

With a profound understanding of the critical role that faculty and staff play in the development of the institution, the "Strategic Development Plan of the Academy to 2030, Vision for 2050" (2015) set forth the goal: *"To build a faculty and staff team that ensures adequate numbers, balanced structure, good ethical standards, and professional and creative working methods, meeting the mission of the Academy."*

To achieve this goal, the Academy has implemented specific solutions such as:

"Developing a workforce plan based on the job position needs of each unit and the entire Academy by 2030; organizing a recruitment process that ensures objectivity, accuracy,

and thoroughness to select the right individuals with good ethics and the potential to develop competencies suitable for the required positions, thereby meeting the human resource needs of the Academy's units; focusing on the professional training and development of faculty and staff in their respective fields, enhancing foreign language skills to meet job requirements, and providing training in leadership and management skills that align with job responsibilities."

As of July 2020, the Academy has developed a full-time faculty team comprising 644 individuals. Among the full-time faculty, there are 88 professors and associate professors (accounting for nearly 13.7%) and 298 doctoral degree holders (accounting for 46.3%). The proportion of faculty with doctoral degrees has increased significantly compared to August 2015, the time when autonomy was implemented following Decision 873 of the Prime Minister (with doctoral degree holders at 34%) (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Full-Time Faculty by Title and Educational Qualifications (Unit: people)

Period	Title and Educational Qualifications					Total Faculty = (3)+(4)+(5)
	Professors (1)	Associate Professors (2)	Doctoral Degree Holders (3)	Master's Degree Holders (4)	Bachelor's Degree Holders (5)	
August 2015	7	76	253	345	146	744
July 2020	11	77	298	338	08	644

Source: Public Information on the Faculty, Management Staff, and Employees of the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture.

The full-time faculty at the Academy is responsible for 52 undergraduate programs, 22 master's programs, and 16 doctoral programs, with a total student body of approximately 20,000. The ratio of full-time faculty to regular students varies depending on the specific group of programs, ranging from approximately 7.5 to 25:1 for each group (Group 1 has the lowest ratio at 7.5:1) (Academy's Public Report 3, 2021).

Furthermore, the Academy has issued regulations on training and professional development for public employees, officials, and workers. It mandates that lecturers with a master's degree, upon recruitment, must undergo overseas training if they have not previously studied abroad at earlier educational levels. Annually, the Academy develops training and professional development plans and organizes various training courses in teaching methods, state management programs for specialists and senior specialists, advanced political theory, party awareness, and new party member training.

The Academy has sent hundreds of individuals for doctoral and master's degree training, both domestically and internationally. For instance, during the 2015-2022 period, 176 lecturers received doctoral degrees and 72 lecturers obtained master's degrees abroad. In contrast, 47 lecturers received doctoral degrees and 40 lecturers obtained master's degrees domestically (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Number of Staff and Faculty Sent for
Training and Professional Development (2015-2022)

Year	International			Domestic		
	Master's Degrees (people)	Doctoral Degrees (people)	Other training (times)	Master's Degrees (people)	Doctoral Degrees (people)	Other training (times)
2015	17	36	206	8	11	1314
2016	14	26	220	5	4	1500
2017	6	35	260	8	0	1578
2018	7	19	395	1	15	213
2019	7	12	237	5	4	1500
2020	7	16	270	4	5	1560
2021	8	15	275	5	3	1555
2022	6	17	289	4	5	1600
Total	72	176	1318	40	47	10820

Source: Academy's Public Report 3, 2021.

Currently, the Academy is implementing the Project on Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education - SAHEP-VNUA (issued under Decision No. 5539/QĐ-BGDĐT dated December 25, 2018, by the Minister of Education and Training) with a total investment of USD 54,200,000, including USD 50,000,000 from ODA loans, USD 3,500,000 as counterpart funding from MARD, and USD 700,000 as counterpart funding from the Academy. The project is set to conclude in 2022 with the objectives of enhancing research capacity, which includes developing and fostering research groups, conducting training on writing skills for international publications, providing short-term specialized training for research staff, sending research staff/technicians/lecturers for short-term training abroad, participating in international conferences abroad, and promoting technology transfer and linkage with farmers and enterprises.

Additionally, the project aims to develop high-quality human resources to meet the demands of the domestic and regional labor markets, and to strengthen university governance by effectively implementing university autonomy. This involves enhancing the Academy's governance system to meet international standards and improving the efficiency of training and research activities within the autonomous framework. Specific activities include conducting two training classes for administrative and management staff over two days with the participation of 10 staff members, sending 8 management staff to study management practices domestically and internationally, developing and finalizing the Academy's internal regulations, hiring two international university governance consultants, and digitizing documents to support university governance. In the near future, many lecturers, managers, and researchers will have the opportunity to improve their skills and capacities in governance, research, and teaching both domestically and internationally.

The above analysis shows that the Academy has built a faculty and staff team that ensures both quantity and quality, balanced structure, and social responsibility. This team possesses the capability and capacity to address critical tasks in both university

governance and academic fields, making them sufficiently strong to achieve and fulfill the institution's goals and mission.

3.2. Infrastructure Capacity

The Strategic Development Plan for the Academy's infrastructure to 2030, with a vision to 2050, sets the goal:

"...to have modern and synchronized facilities that meet the needs of training activities, scientific and technological research, social services, and management operations according to the model of advanced research universities in the world." Some expected results for the Academy's infrastructure in the short-term and mid-term plans include: "The technical infrastructure system will be newly invested and upgraded, including the transportation system, electricity, telecommunications, water supply, and drainage systems of the Academy. Complete the technical infrastructure for the Center for Research and Development of Subtropical Agriculture; renovate the green campus and landscape of the Academy; invest in teaching, learning, and research equipment for lecture halls, practical/research rooms in a synchronized, modern, and efficient manner. In the short term, focus on upgrading existing laboratories and adding new practical training rooms to serve training and research. In the 2020-2030 period, strengthen investment in research laboratories on the main campus of the Academy." (Strategic Development Plan of the Academy to 2030, Vision 2050, 2015).

The Academy is currently utilizing and managing a total area of 1,919,067 square meters, corresponding to 83.4 square meters per student, which is nearly three times the regulatory requirement (at least 25 square meters per student). Of this, the floor area dedicated to directly supporting education and scientific research (including laboratories, practical rooms, workshops, classrooms, etc.) is 133,000 square meters, equivalent to 5.78 square meters per student, almost double the regulatory requirement (at least 3 square meters per student) as stipulated in Circular 24/2015/TT-BGDĐT dated September 23, 2015, on National Standards for Higher Education Institutions by the Minister of Education and Training. Additionally, the Academy currently has one library (3,795.7 square meters) with seven reading rooms (380 seats), 115 search computers, 18,590 book titles, 2,283 journals, 15,260 e-books, and 13 databases. By 2022, upon the completion of the SAHEP-VNUA Project, the Academy's infrastructure will significantly improve (Table 3.3), particularly in terms of facilities supporting education, research, and university governance. These improvements include one lecture hall and seven buildings dedicated to training and practical activities across various faculties, all equipped with modern and smart equipment (such as classrooms fitted with touchscreen systems, wireless testing devices, and smart Iscan devices).

Table 3.3: Facilities Directly Supporting Education and Scientific Research

No	Room	Number of Rooms		Purpose	Users	Floor Area (m ²)	
		2019	2022			2019	2022
1	Laboratory	56	66	Educational and research purposes	Students and trainees	1908	2456
2	Practical Room	196	327			11888	16350
3	Internship Workshop	02	03			943,78	1143,78
4	Multipurpose Training Center	02	04			5248	8260
5	Auditorium	03	35			1041	8041
6	Classroom	139	197			26137	41504
7	Multimedia Room	04	07			440	760
8	Library	01	02		Faculty and students	3795,7	4595,7
9	Other Functional Rooms	66	196		Faculty and staff	3269	6860

Source: Public Disclosure Report of the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture for the Academic Years 2018-2022; Handbook for Implementing the Project on Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education issued under Decision No. 5539/QĐ-BGDĐT dated December 25, 2018, by the Minister of Education and Training.

In comparison with the current regulations, such as Circular No. 24/2015/TT-BGDĐT dated September 23, 2015, which stipulates National Standards for Higher Education Institutions; Decree No. 16/2015/NĐ-CP dated February 16, 2015, of the Government, which regulates the autonomy mechanism of public service units; and Circular No. 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT, which stipulates the standards for evaluating the quality of educational programs at higher education levels, it can be seen that the Academy has fully developed the infrastructure capacity to support education, scientific research, and community service in the process of implementing autonomy and accountability.

3.3. Financial Capacity

According to Decision 873, the Academy is responsible for fully ensuring its operating and investment expenses. Therefore, in its Financial Development Strategy to 2020 with a vision to 2030, the Academy aims to establish and complete a financial autonomy plan, diversify revenue sources, and strive to increase financial revenues annually. The strategy focuses on the rational and effective use of financial resources for the Academy's activities, gradually improving and enhancing the livelihoods of its staff, officials, and workers. The financial revenue and expenditure situation of the Academy is shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Financial Revenue and Expenditure of the Academy (2020 Projected)

No	Content	2015 Actual		2018 Actual		2020 Actual	
		Amount (Million VND)	Structure (%)	Amount (Million VND)	Structure (%)	Amount (Million VND)	Structure (%)
1	Total Revenue in the Year	550.625,5	100,0	449.562,79	100,00	561.960,00	100,00
	- Regular State Budget	83.146,5	15,10	20.647,53	4,59	15.300,00	2,72
	- Irregular State Budget	54.347,5	9,87	27.041,64	6,02	33.200,00	5,91
	- State Budget for Capital Construction	27.040,0	4,91	24.728,00	5,50	139.000,00	24,73
	- Revenue from Academy	386.091,5	70,12	377.145,62	83,89	374.460,00	66,63
	+ Professional Revenue	321.188,1	83,19	321.929,38	85,36	307.960,00	82,24
	+ Service and Production	64.903,3	16,81	55.216,25	14,64	66.500,00	17,76
2	Total Expenditure in the Year	409.273,3	100,0	349.282,01	100,0	490.707,49	100,0

Source: Consolidated from the financial reports of 2015, 2018, and the 2020 budget estimates of the Academy.

The data presented in Table 3.4 indicate that state budget allocations to the Academy have significantly decreased over the years, especially for regular expenses (from 83,146.5 million VND in 2015 to 20,643.53 million VND in 2018 and down to 15,300 million VND in 2020). Revenue from professional activities (primarily tuition fees) has also decreased over the years (from 321,929.38 million VND in 2018 to 307,960 million VND in 2020) due to a reduction in student numbers. However, the Academy's total revenue has not decreased significantly due to increased state budget allocations for capital construction and higher revenues from services and production. Examining the revenue structure, income from tuition fees (the main component of professional revenue) consistently accounts for a large proportion of total revenue (ranging from 82.24% to 85.36%), while income from services and production accounts for a smaller proportion (ranging from 14.64% to 17.76%). With this revenue structure, future difficulties in student recruitment could significantly impact the Academy's financial balance. As of 2018 and the 2020 budget projections, the total annual revenue consistently exceeds total annual expenditure, allowing for annual savings and the establishment of various funds (such as Reward, Welfare, Income Stability Reserve, and Development of Professional Activities) in accordance with legal regulations.

The average monthly income and welfare benefits of the staff, officials, and workers have gradually increased over the years, with average growth rates of 1.73%, 3.91%, 4.12%, and 3.92% (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Average Monthly Income of Staff, Officials, and Workers (2018-2022)

No	Indicator	Amount (Million VND)					Average Growth Rate (%)
		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
	Average Monthly Income						
1	Management Staff (including part-time)	18,43	19,01	19,51	19,66	19,74	1,73
2	Teaching Staff	13,50	14,14	14,69	14,99	15,74	3,91
3	Support Staff	7,25	7,45	8,06	8,38	8,52	4,12
	Annual Welfare Benefits	12,50	13,50	14,40	15,30	15,30	5,18

Source: Consolidated from the income reports of staff, officials, and workers of the Academy

The results of the above analysis show that after more than five years of implementing autonomy, the financial capacity of the Academy remains adequate to continue exercising autonomy in conjunction with accountability as stipulated by law.

4. Solutions to Enhance Capacity for Autonomy and Accountability

Based on the analysis of the Academy's current autonomy capacity, we propose several solutions to enhance the implementation of autonomy and accountability as follows:

- **Development and Adjustment of Strategic Plans:** Like other higher education institutions, the Academy needs to adjust and update its development plans and strategies for its faculty and staff towards a leaner, more creative, and professional structure that aligns with its context, practical conditions, goals, mission, and vision. Alongside improving the quality of the teaching staff (which the Academy has done well, as analyzed above), it is essential to focus on building and developing the management staff, researchers, and support personnel to enhance the effectiveness of university management and governance, effectively utilize physical resources, and develop scientific fields. This will strengthen the Academy's brand, serve the community, and increase revenue. This is considered a critical capacity that determines the success or failure of implementing autonomy and accountability, innovating university governance, and enhancing academic quality.
- **Reforming Salary and Reward Mechanisms:** The Academy should continue to innovate its salary and reward mechanisms for staff and workers towards performance-based or job position-based compensation, avoiding equal distribution (currently, the income of the Academy's staff and officials is mainly based on rank and grade). This approach will encourage them to fully dedicate themselves to their work and compete to maximize their capacities for the sustainable development of the organization. Reforming the salary and reward

mechanisms is necessary in the context of autonomy and is seen as an important factor in attracting talent, especially highly qualified lecturers and researchers.

- **Optimizing Management and Utilization of Physical Resources:** Change the management and utilization mechanisms of physical resources, especially those not fully utilized (apart from directly serving education), towards a contract-based approach (e.g., contracting centers, laboratories, faculties, departments) to save on maintenance costs and simultaneously increase the Academy's revenue.
- **Diversifying Revenue Streams:** The financial development strategy of the Academy, and higher education institutions in general, should aim to develop plans for diversifying revenue sources, increasing the proportion of income from production, business, and services, and striving to increase financial revenue annually. This includes saving, rationally and effectively using financial resources for the institution's activities.
- **Leveraging Existing Resources:** Effectively exploit and use available resources (brand, land, underutilized assets) to increase revenue while promoting and strengthening the institution's brand.

By implementing these solutions, the Academy can significantly enhance its capacity for autonomy and accountability, ensuring sustainable growth and improved quality in both education and research.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis and evaluation of the survey results regarding the current capacity of the faculty and staff, infrastructure systems, financial capacity, and the strategies and plans for developing personnel, infrastructure, and finances at the Academy, the following conclusion can be drawn: The Academy has been moving towards building a team of faculty and staff that ensures both quantity and quality, balanced structure, social responsibility, and professional and creative working methods. This team possesses the capability and capacity to address critical tasks in both university governance and academic fields, making them sufficiently strong to achieve and fulfill the institution's goals and mission. The Academy has adequate infrastructure capacity to support education and scientific research, ensuring the implementation of autonomy. Financially, although the proportion of the state budget in total revenue is very small, the Academy still ensures funding for regular expenses and investment activities. In the future, the Academy needs to implement a comprehensive set of solutions: timely adjust and update development plans and strategies for the team to ensure they remain relevant and effective; continue to innovate the salary and reward mechanisms for staff and workers, moving towards performance-based or job position-based compensation to fully engage staff and encourage them to excel in their roles; revise the management and utilization mechanisms for physical resources, especially those not fully utilized, to save maintenance costs and increase revenue; develop plans to diversify revenue sources, increase the proportion of income from production, business, and services, and strive to

increase financial revenue annually; and utilize existing resources (brand, land, underutilized assets) effectively to increase revenue while promoting and strengthening the institution's quality and reputation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

We declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Nguyen Cong Uoc has been a senior lecturer in the Department of Educational Methods, Faculty of Tourism and Foreign Languages, at Vietnam National University of Agriculture for 20 years. His research interests include teacher education, professional development, curriculum design and development, and university autonomy.

Dr. Nguyen Duc Huy has been teaching and researching in Vietnam and the Czech Republic since 1995. He is currently a lecturer at VNU - UEd. His research focuses on mathematics, math education, and educational sciences. He has participated in numerous mathematical and educational projects and has published many papers and reports on these subjects.

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